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Loss, Refiguration, and Death in *Raoul de Cambrai*

Raoul de Cambrai is not only a lengthy text, but also a highly complex one. Standing alone as an individual *chanson de geste*, rather than forming part of an epic cycle, its focus is inward and self-obsessive.¹ The self-replicating quality of the narrative, with its repetition and layering of themes and motifs, is mirrored in the bounded nature of the epic world it portrays – a mimesis neatly summed up by William Calin:

Alienation is perhaps most strongly expressed in spatial terms. Too far from Spain or southern Italy, no outside-oriented crusades are provided for these people. And no vertical vistas, leading up to God. Indeed, the barons act like invading Saracens, ravaging dulce France for their own purposes. In this limited, too sharply defined space where there is not enough land for all, they impede each other and cannot escape.²

The introvert nature of this world does not lead to any accompanying stability, or sense of coherence. Cohesion is lost along with any legitimate focus for either conflict or transcendent adoration. This to the extent that ambiguity and rupture become the key characteristics of this *chanson*, the disintegration of social and feudal bonds forming the core of its narrative.³

This narrative crisis occurs both in the sphere of feudal relations and in that of the family. On the death of his father, Raoul Taillefer, the infant Raoul is disinherited from the fief of the Cambrésis, which is then granted by King Louis to Giboin le Mancel. When Raoul is grown, restitution is required, but in place of returning the Cambrésis to Raoul, Louis promises him the first fief that next becomes available (ll. 556–63). This is the fief of the Vermandois, on the death of its overlord, Herbert, former friend and companion to Raoul's father. Rather than seeing a return to the feudal *status quo*, this re-allocation of the Vermandois provokes further disruption and antagonism, as Herbert's four sons are thereby disinherited. From this point onward, the narrative is opened up to a spiralling conflict that sets Raoul both against his mother, Aalais, who argues forcefully for him to respect the duties of feudal alliance and inheritance, and against his liegeman, Bernier, whose father, Ybert, is one of the disinherited sons of the Vermandois. The inter-familial conflict between the Cambrésiens and the Vermandois then extends across the generations, pulling in both the culpable and the innocent in a self-propelling cycle of vengeance, retaliation, and death.⁴

1 All textual references will be to: *Raoul de Cambrai*, ed. and trans. by Sarah Kay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), and all translations are from this edition. Although Raoul does not feature in any cycle of linked songs, its content does, however, ally it to the *Cycle des barons révoltés*, disparate though this category may be.

2 William Calin, *A Muse for Heroes: Nine Centuries of the Epic in France*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 51. This description of the epic world only applies to the first two sections of *Raoul*, RI and the Gautier section, as in the final section, RII, the action is more geographically varied and conflict with Saracens becomes a major narrative topos.

3 This disruption has been the subject of much comment. While Kay invokes the crisis situation of: 'the three relations that structure medieval society – companionship, feudalism, and the family' (*Raoul*, Introduction, p. ix), Calin states: 'We find ourselves in a torn, ambiguous world, where the norms of feudal society are no longer conducive to existence' (*The Old French Epic of Revolt*, (Geneva: Droz, 1962), p. 115). Peter Haidu, however, sees this violence as endemic to the *chanson de geste* as a whole: 'It is precisely in the *chanson de geste*, the sung epics of medieval France, that violence is repeatedly displayed. The narrative kernel of these narrative poems is the social turbulence, the "irrepressible violence" ("cette violence incoercible") of a political conflict' (Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The 'Song of Roland' and the Birth of the State* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 2). Haidu here quotes Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bournazel, *La Mutation féodale: X^e–XII^e siècles* (Paris: P.U.F., 1980), pp. 452f.

4 This breaking down of social relations may reflect a particular type of generic patterning – that of the *Cycle des barons révoltés* – yet this in turn has been read as symptomatic of social and political changes taking place in late twelfth and thirteenth-century France. See Pauline M. Matarasso, *Recherches historiques et littéraires sur 'Raoul de Cambrai'* (Paris: Nizet, 1962).

Although *Raoul de Cambrai* portrays a scene of crisis, breaking apart, and decay which operates at every level of the text, it is the crisis of masculine authority, and in particular the ambiguity of paternal representation on which I will concentrate here. It is evident that the *chanson* reveals the dysfunction and failure of the homosocial ideal – the bonds between men that structure the feudal world. This is a failure which appears in many *chansons de geste*, where an ideal of harmony and reciprocal duty gives way to antagonism and the breaking of faith.⁵ Yet in *Raoul* the lack inherent in this utopic vision of masculine harmony points to something that lies beyond, to the failure of the paternal function itself, as the social construction of the world along patriarchal lines is shown to be innately flawed, and the father-figures of the narrative are found wanting. Perhaps one of the most perceptive and interesting studies in this respect is that by Alexandre Leupin, ‘*Raoul de Cambrai: La Batardise de l’écriture*’, which examines (among other issues) the paternal role and the impossibility of the son’s accession to the place of the father in a text that constantly looks toward the establishment of a stable patriarchal economy, yet in which no-one is capable of attaining the status of paternity.⁶ As Leupin states, however: ‘Que ce père soit en vérité le Nom-du-Père, et non le père de la réalité ou le père génétique, le fait que nul est, dans la chanson, à la hauteur de la paternité, suffirait à le démontrer’.⁷ Rather than speaking of the male characters as heirs to the real father, the father who bequeaths a physical and genealogical inheritance, Leupin places his criticism in a Lacanian context. The paternity which the characters fail to inherit and embody is that of the *nom-du-père*, ‘the “paternal metaphor” that inheres in symbolization’.⁸ The *nom-du-père* is: ‘the symbol of an authority at once legislative and punitive. It represented, within the Symbolic, that which made the Symbolic possible – all those agencies that placed enduring restrictions on the infant’s desire and threatened to punish, by castration, infringements of their law’.⁹ The failure of the male characters of *Raoul* to stand as representatives of this transcendent paternity and to be invested with its authority signals their inherent lack, but also the instability of the social realm which they embody. Although Leupin concentrates on the *chanson* of *Raoul*, his study is relevant to the question of the status of the father and the nature of the paternal role in general in the *chanson de geste*. In place of an inviolable masculine authority founded on the word as law, as imposition – the *nom-du-père* – we find a world where this masculine investment in the paternal metaphor is troubled and disrupted. The ambivalence that *Raoul de Cambrai* manifests towards the place of the father, revealed through the text’s innate lack of paternal authority and its falling-away into violence and death, can be mapped on to many other *chansons de geste*, in which similar patterns of dissatisfaction and attempted recuperation can be seen.

The moral universe

Neither the text nor its characters are able to establish and maintain an ethical and moral framework in which society can operate with any sense of security. As is pointed out by Leupin: ‘Raoul figure bien la déstabilisation systématique de l’autorité sémantique que le texte opère’, while Kay discusses ‘la mouvance éthique du texte lui-même’.¹⁰ This instability and slippage finds particular expression in the opposition the text sets up between the concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy and how these operate within the narrative. Symptomatic of the fluidity that pertains in the narrative as a whole, these terms are seen to be inherently unstable, their definition and applicability constantly open to reinterpretation. This disconnection works to undercut and destabilise the inherent meaning and measurability of ‘legitimacy’ as a value-concept. Its function as signifier of a universal, a symbol with an

5 As Simon Gaunt points out, *Raoul* narrates: ‘the death of the epic ideal, for it systematically unpicks all the male bonds which underpin the ethical system of the chansons de geste: the bonds of king and vassal, of kinsmen and particularly of companions’ (*Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 52).

6 In *Romanic Review*, 79 (1988), 89–104. Translated as: ‘*Raoul de Cambrai: The Illegitimacy of Writing*’ in *The New Medievalism*, ed. by Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1991), pp. 131–54.

7 Leupin, ‘La Batardise de l’écriture’, p. 91.

8 Malcolm Bowie, Lacan (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 109.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

10 Leupin, ‘La Batardise de l’écriture’, p. 103, and Kay, ‘L’Éthique dans Raoul de Cambrai’, *Op.Cit.: Revue de littératures française et comparée*, 13 (1999), pp. 5–10 (p. 5).

acknowledged and quantifiable meaning, is fractured, opened up to a heterogeneity and ambiguity that call into question the very nature of those who bear it.

At the opening of the narrative, it is Raoul de Cambrai who appears to be the most evidently legitimate character, his noble birth complemented by his moral positioning as disenfranchised heir. Although his legitimacy of birth is in no way presented as questionable, the narrative's problematising of Raoul's moral or social legitimacy is marked early in the tale. Following King Louis' rejection of his request for the restitution of the Cambrésis, Raoul's uncle, Guerri, finds the young man playing chess:

As eschés joue Raous de Cambrizis
 si con li hom q'i mal n'i entendi:
 Gueris le voit, par le bras le saisi,
 son peliçon li desront et parti.
 'Fil a putain', le clama – si menti –
 'malvais lechieres, por qoi joes tu ci?
 N'as tant de terre, par verté le te dī,
 ou tu peüses conreer un ronci'. (ll. 482–89)

(Raoul is playing chess like a man who meant no harm: Guerri sees him and seizes him by the arm, tearing his fur mantle. 'Son of a whore', he called him – quite without foundation – 'cowardly brute, why are you here playing games? I tell you truly, you haven't enough land to rub down an old nag on!')

The epithet 'fil a putain' (son of a whore) is marked as untrue by the narrator, yet the actual extent of this 'untruth' is debatable. Aalais may not in fact be a whore, the accusation later thrown at Bernier's mother by Raoul (ll. 1151–58), yet the narrative's depiction of Raoul as illegitimate in terms other than those of paternity and legal marriage is one which is increasingly underscored as the tale progresses. Raoul's rejection of his ancestral inheritance ruptures his initially virtuous image, as his desire to pursue the fief of the Vermandois represents a privileging and choice of the morally illegitimate. Calin places the onus of this fall from grace on circumstance. He says of Raoul:

His is the tragedy of disinheritance, the persecuted orphan suffering from an impression of inferiority, torn by an unquenchable thirst for power and respectability which he ought to have possessed from the family legacy but which has been denied him.¹¹

This view of the hero presents him as entirely subject to fate, struggling against external forces, and motivated by an uncontrollable internal impulse. Although partially true in regard to Raoul's youth, as his initial orphaning and disinheritance are beyond the child Raoul's control, and prove the catalyst for future events, this description precludes the notion of Raoul's own rational choice. The *chanson*'s narrator significantly points to Raoul's potential to become the ideal knight and vassal, a potential which is negated by his rashness:

S'en lui n'eüst un poi de desmesure
 mieudres vasals ne tint onques droiture,
 mais de ce fu molt pesans l'aventure:
 hom desreez a molt grant painne dure. (ll. 320–23)

(If he had not had in him an immoderate streak, there could not have been a better vassal occupying his rightful place; but the outcome of this fault was to prove disastrous – an unbridled man has great difficulty in surviving).

As seen throughout the narrative, the impetus of Raoul's character is towards violence, yet the element of choice is of prime importance in the delineation of his character. Although feudal disharmony is already rife, due to the actions of Louis in disinheriting firstly Raoul, then the sons of Herbert, it is Raoul's acting-out of his own personal desires and his exercising of free will which bring about the

¹¹ Calin, *The Old French Epic of Revolt*, p. 115.

destruction of the bonds of feudal companionship, family, and personal friendship. Raoul represents an uncontained, and uncontainable, source of violence within the text, yet it is the element of reason and choice inherent in his actions which ultimately marks him as a fallen hero. His *desmesure* cannot be the only motivation behind his destructive actions, or the moral tone of the tale would lose much of its innate force, and Raoul himself would be reduced to nothing but an image of incoherent, irrational obsession.

A recognition of the moral sphere of *Raoul de Cambrai* is essential to any interpretation of its characters and the implications of their actions. As is pointed out by Calin, the world of the *chanson de geste* is one of universalised moralisation:

The social or political aspect of man's nature is enlarged almost automatically to include the moral one, an all-inclusive conceptualized view of man as an agent entrusted with certain rights and bound by certain duties.¹²

This expansion of the notion of duty beyond the confines of the social sphere certainly sees the incorporation of the moral and the ethical, as appears strongly in *Raoul de Cambrai*, but this shift towards a physical and metaphysical wholeness also, significantly, implicates the universal and the transcendent. It is in both the social realm and in that of a moral and ethical transcendence that Raoul's failure is marked. His rejection of the paternal lands, in demanding the Vermandois in place of the Cambrésis (ll. 661–68), represents the first stage in his alienation from the clan and his slippage from moral legitimacy. By claiming the Vermandois, he is denying ancestry and inheritance, a memory kept alive and renewed by his mother, Aalais. This denial also, however, marks Raoul's rejection of a higher authority – that of God. The intrinsic link between the worldly and the transcendent is marked by the words of the curse Aalais lays upon her son:

Or viex aler tel terre chalengier
ou tes ancestres ne prist ainz un denier,
et qant por moi ne le viex or laisier,
cil Damedieix qi tout a a jugier
ne t'en remaint sain ne sauf ne entier! (ll. 953–57)

(Now you want to lay claim to land where your forebear never took so much as a penny, and if you won't give it up for my sake, then let God who judges everything not bring you back safe and sound and in one piece!)

The Law-of-the-Father is here brought into play through the exigencies of a system that binds duty into a transcendental ethical framework. In the context of the *chanson de geste*, this moral framing is inevitably predicated on the Word of God, the dominance of the Christian ethic permeating all aspects of the epic world-view. This inviolable synthesis between the patriarchal and the spiritual is clearly marked in the context of Raoul's link with both lack and death. His fall is not bounded and contained by the secular sphere: the violence that brings about Raoul's alienation from family and society gains impetus and consequence as the narrative progresses, ultimately transcending the structures of the secular world. Raoul not only fails to take up the place of the real father of the text, rejecting the paternal inheritance, he also rejects the transcendent Father, a self-disinheritance that produces the ultimate alienation of the Christian Middle Ages – that of man from God.

Raoul's blasphemy and desecration culminate in his invasion of the lands of the Vermandois and his attack on the nunnery at Origny, where Bernier's mother, Marsent, is abbess. His own words set him in opposition to all that is held sacred:

Mon tré tendez em mi liu del mostier
et en ces porches esseront mi sonmier;
dedans les creutes conreés mon mangier;
sor les crois d'or seront mi esprevier;
devant l'autel faites aparillier

¹² *Ibid*, p. 113.

un riche lit ou me volrai couchier;
 au crucefis me volrai apuier
 et les nonnains prendront mi esquier. (ll. 1058–65)

(Pitch my tent in the middle of the church and my packhorses will stand in its porches; prepare my food in the crypts, my sparrow-hawks can perch on the gold crosses, and prepare a magnificent bed for me to sleep on in front of the altar; I will use the crucifix as a back rest and my squires can make free with the nuns).

His army's veneration of the holy place here provides a marked contrast to Raoul's total neglect of the Christian, moral or ethical demands of the situation:

Li Saint sonnerent sus el maistre mostier,
 de Dieu lor menbre le pere droiturier;
 tos les plus fox convint a souploier:
 ne vossent pas le corsaint empirier. (ll. 1074–78)

(The bells rang out high in the principal church; remembering God the Father of justice, even the craziest of them felt compelled to show reverence: they had no wish to desecrate the holy relics).

Their recognition of the ethical structures that frame the social world and link the secular with the transcendent law of God the Father underscores Raoul's innate lack; his transgression is both careless and immoral, subverting the structuring order which the text marks as valid and attempts to uphold, despite the inability of its protagonists to live up to it.

Guerri's warning reveals the depth of Raoul's sin, linking his blasphemy with inevitable death:

'Voir', dist Gueris, 'trop ies desmesurez!
 Encor n'a gaires qe tu fus adoubés.
 Se Diex te heit, tu seras tost finez.
 Par les frans homes est cis lius honnorez;
 ne doit pas estre li corsains vergondez.' (ll. 1098–1102)

('Indeed', said Guerri, 'you are getting above yourself! It's scarcely any time since you were knighted. If God takes against you, you won't last long. This place is venerated by men of good standing; the holy relics should not be brought into dishonour').

The abbess Marsent then invokes the name of God in an attempt to dissuade Raoul from the 'grans pechiés' (great sin) (l. 1128) which he is about to commit. Despite the impending doom, Raoul's rejection of the divine cannot be gainsaid, and the subsequent firing of the nunnery and death of Marsent mark his investiture with death as inevitable. His defiance of God and his transgression of divine law thus parallel and exceed the breaking of the bonds that structure and unite family and feudal society. Raoul here becomes the ultimate rebel, setting himself up as the point of origin and locus of meaning in a radically revised social and textual economy. This re-writing of the individual relation to the transcendent rejects the divine and the Law-of-the-Father as the universal point of reference, yet Raoul cannot access the place left vacant. His innate lack posits him as a character whose access to this symbolic space is foreclosed. He fails to achieve the sublime authority gained through the imposition of the *nom-du-père*; he cannot implement any kind of phatic economy in which the Word (either that of God, or, in the Lacanian context, that of the transcendent Father) can function as an inviolable pronouncement.

Legitimacy

If Raoul's innate legitimacy appears unstable, how does this relate to that of Bernier, bastard son of Ybert de Ribemont and Marsent? Although Bernier's legal illegitimacy is regularly mentioned by both the other characters and by the narrator, his noble appearance and knightly qualities are also frequently underscored. In the midst of battle, Gautier asks: 'Qi est cis hom qe ci samble baron?' (Who is this

man, who seems such a true and noble baron?) (l. 3777), and on Louis' announcement that he will give the Vermandois to a prince after Ybert's death, the response is unequivocal: 'Dist Ybers, "Sire, bien fait a otroier;/ a Berneçon la donnai des l'autrier"' (Ybert said, 'I agree, sire; only yesterday I gave it to young Bernier') (ll. 5218–19). Bernier's integration into the moral framework of the narrative marks him as textual counterpoint to Raoul, as he fulfils all the criteria of social and moral legitimacy that Raoul does not. In the feudal sphere, Bernier respects the bonds of loyalty and companionship that maintain the social *status quo*, and his recognition of family ties is equally marked: Bernier's bond with his mother is close and loving, while his relationship with his father becomes harmonious once he breaks away from Raoul. Above all, however, it is Bernier's continuous veneration of God that most significantly marks his polarity with Raoul and his own moral legitimacy. He tells Raoul:

Se je avoie le brun elme lacié,
je combatroie a cheval ou a pié
vers un franc home molt bien aparillié
q'il n'est bastars c'il n'a Dieu renoié; (ll. 1528–31)

(If I had my burnished helmet laced on, I would contend on horseback or on foot against any well-armed nobleman that no-one is a bastard unless he has denied God).

As Leupin states:

A l'en croire, la bâtardise n'empêche rien: c'est que, de tous les chevaliers du texte, il fait appel d'un ordre transcendantal qui la justifie [...] Au regard de Dieu, l'illégitimité ne compte donc pas, elle ne saurait être imputée à Bernier; ce personnage est donc le lieu exact d'une inversion radicale affectant la dialectique du légitime/illégitime.¹³

This legitimate/illegitimate transposition of the two men is reflected in the genealogical fate of their families, as Bernier's lineage assimilates and outlives that of Raoul. The extinction of the male line of the Cambrésiens, with the death of Raoul and his nephew, Gautier, contrasts with the further validation of Bernier through his marriage and fatherhood. The marriage of Guerri's daughter, Beatrice, to Bernier (ll. 5884–88) sees the merging of the two families, but it is the Vermandois patrilineage that is extended in legitimate form, through the birth of Bernier's two sons.¹⁴

Despite this 'legitimising' of Bernier over and above the legally legitimate son of the text, Raoul, Bernier proves himself equally unable to access the place of the symbolic father. The legitimate/illegitimate inversion of the characters of Raoul and Bernier in moral terms does not serve to fix them as polarised, universal, signifiers any more than did their initial straightforward interpretation in terms of their legitimacy of birth. Rather than being placed in clear opposition, the two terms, legitimate/illegitimate, function as a dialectic that reflects the inherent instability of the semiotics, and of the narrative, of *Raoul de Cambrai*. If Bernier is figured as the site for the playing-out of a problematic that turns around the nature of character and its relation to legitimacy, morality and stability, he cannot be simultaneously portrayed as the locus of a symbolic paternity or an ethical transcendence. The instability of character in *Raoul* precludes any such definition, while the inevitable

13 Leupin, 'La Batardise de l'écriture', p. 95. The notion that illegitimacy is not an issue in *Raoul* conflicts with the ecclesiastical position at the time, which placed greater emphasis on legitimacy, the Church attempting to influence secular society in this direction. This may indicate that the late twelfth-century characterisation of Bernier stems from a reworking of earlier material, dating from a period when illegitimacy was more readily accepted by both Church and society. Sarah Kay suggests that anxiety over paternity appears more strongly in epic than in romance, which again marks the 'legitimising' of Bernier as something of an anomaly. See: *The 'Chansons de geste' in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 84.

14 It could be argued that Bernier's place in the patrilineage is somewhat unstable, owing to his bastardy, but it is quite clear that he is accepted as legitimate heir by his own father, Ybert, and is also portrayed as morally legitimate through his allegiance to God. The fact that Beatrice presses for marriage with Bernier underscores his validity in the genealogical context, and marks her as voicing the strategies of harmony and cohesion that the text seeks to establish. For further exploration of the role of women in *Raoul de Cambrai* see Finn E. Sinclair, *Milk and Blood: Gender and Genealogy in the 'Chanson de Geste'* (Bern, New York & Paris: Peter Lang) (forthcoming).

plunge into warfare and violence manifested by the text marks it as a sphere in which characters are unavoidably linked to disruption and death, rather than to continuation.

Death and re-figuration

Raoul is a character marked by death in every context – feudal, familial, and religious: invested with death as he is granted the fief of the Vermandois (ll. 829–31), cursed with death by his mother (ll. 953–57), and warned by Guerri of the brief life that awaits the defier of God (ll. 1100–02). As stated by Leupin: ‘Il est, par excellence, celui qui renie Dieu, [...] ce qui revient à signer, en ces âges théocentriques, son propre arrêt de mort’.¹⁵ But divine judgement appears suspended, as the narrative inscribes Raoul as posthumous hero, his heart greater than that of the giant Jean de Ponthieu, slain in battle by Raoul (ll. 3058–67).¹⁶ Raoul’s bravery and heroic quality appear incontrovertible, unmarred, at the point of his actual death, by his *desmesure* and his alienation from family and God.

In death, Raoul paradoxically becomes signifier of the sublime or transcendental in a way that was impossible in life. In both life and death he can be read as the signifier of an uncontrollable violence, yet it is only after death that this force for violence is transmuted and extended to encompass its eternal renewal, to transcend the social frame of the immediate narrative. In death, Raoul is re-figured, now becoming a distinctly symbolic figure through his continuing power over memory and renewal. The desire for retribution can never be satisfied, nor can the endless desire for the recovery and restitution of that which has been lost. Not only is Raoul’s memory perpetuated by the characters that remain, but his nephew, Gautier, is inscribed in his place, invested with all that Raoul represents:

Dame Aalais commence a larmoier
tout por son fil qe ele avoit tant chier:
en liu de lui ont restoré Gautier. (ll. 3645–67)¹⁷

(The lady Alice begins to weep in memory of her dearly loved son: they have made up for his loss by putting Gautier in his place).

Gautier is heir to Raoul in more ways than one – heir to Guerri and Aalais, to their lands and wealth, he is also Raoul’s genealogical heir, and, beyond this physical context, is heir to the conflict embodied by his uncle.¹⁸ Yet Gautier’s replacing of Raoul is at once marked as a perfect mirroring of his uncle and as its abnegation. Like Raoul, Gautier fails to take up the place of the father and to represent the *nom-du-père*. Like Raoul, he is linked rather with the continuation of violent conflict than with the continuation of the genealogical line. Like Raoul, he dies a violent death. Yet Gautier is in no way as compelling a figure as Raoul, for he lacks his uncle’s innate *desmesure* and his overwhelming ability to reject and attempt to overturn the frameworks that structure the social and God-given world.

15 Leupin, ‘La Batardise de l’écriture’, p. 94.

16 Following Raoul’s death at the hands of Bernier, the bodies of Raoul and Jean de Ponthieu are slit open and their hearts (the seat of courage) compared. While Jean’s heart is: ‘petiz, ausi con d’un effant’ (small like a child’s) (l. 3064), Raoul’s, in stark contrast, is: ‘asez graindres [...] qe d’un torel a charue traiant’ (very much larger than that of a draught ox at plough) (ll. 3066–67).

17 In addition, Gautier is marked as having inherited the family qualities (l. 3660), and Aalais later asks Guerri whether the newly-knighted Gautier has taken her son’s place in terms of his ability to fight (ll. 3925–27).

18 The replacement of Raoul by Gautier as Aalais’ heir conforms to the genealogical linearity of feudal inheritance, and thus creates no problems: ‘En poi de terme est la terre aclinee’ (And so the fief is quickly placed under [Gautier’s] lordship) (l. 3471), yet it is unclear as to whether Aalais is referring to the Cambrésis at this point, or purely to Cambrai. Gautier and his mother travel to the Cambrésis to see Aalais (l. 3426), yet this fief is not Aalais’ to give away. In addition, the dispossession of Giboin le Mancel would seem to create a problem that is neither featured nor resolved by the text. It would thus seem most probable that, in line with Kay’s reading of the text, the land which Aalais bequeaths to Gautier is that of Cambrai, a holding which belongs to her in its entirety, rather than being land which is held in fief from the king. See Sarah Kay, ‘Raoul de Cambrai ou Raoul sans terre?’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 84 (1983), 311–17.

The symbolic father

Repetition, continuation, and death are intrinsically linked in this text where the genealogical and psychological substitution of one character for another is emblematic of the continuation of the *chanson* itself:

Cet éternel retour du même (la sur-vie, emblématisée par le fils ou le neveu qui répètent le père) et de l'autre (la mort) a affaire au plan de l'écriture proprement dit, en tant que les *rejuvenationes* de la fiction n'en sont que la figure.¹⁹

The textual world is characterised by repetition and continuation, but is also haunted by death. As described by Baudrillard:

Even psychoanalysis gravitates around this haunting, which it fends off while at the same time circumscribing it within an individualised unconscious, thus reducing it, under the Law-of-the-Father, to the obsessional fear of castration and the Signifier.²⁰

Repetition and re-figuration are only manifestations of this inherent preoccupation with transience and decay in a symbolic order which is invested with death and the fear of death. In *Raoul de Cambrai*, the ultimate failure of the male characters to inherit the paternal metaphor and to access the realm of the transcendent father binds them in a cycle of repetition that consigns them to ineffectuality, if not oblivion. Their falling-into-death becomes inevitable. Paradoxically, it is only through death itself that the real fathers of the text can transcend the foreclosure of the Symbolic order and access the sublime, becoming imbued with the symbolic authority hitherto denied them.

The nature of this sublime is, however, open to question in *Raoul de Cambrai*. Although, as mentioned earlier, the link between the secular and the divine appears inherent, *Raoul* is a text in which any sense of a religious ethos and motivation is continually suppressed and frustrated, a move that contrasts markedly with the religious ethos of many other *chansons de geste*. It is King Louis and the doubled nature of his patriarchal role – as representative of God and as earthly monarch – who embodies the essence of the crisis of *Raoul*. Louis' link with the transcendental, with the Word of God, is ruptured by his evident failure to impose a phatic, self-fulfilling law based on the word as inviolable pronouncement, yet the inherent lack that he embodies is seen to be integral to the text as a whole, and to the other fathers that also singularly fail to take on the mantle of symbolic father.

The paternal space of the narrative appears foreclosed, as none of the characters exhibit the qualities that would predestine them to become the figure of authority through which the Law-of-the-Father would be voiced and imposed, and all are rejected by the sons of the text. Just as King Louis and Raoul Taillefer are side-lined by Raoul's self-centred impulse towards the creation of an economy predicated on individual desire and its attempted fulfilment, so too is Aalais, as representative of the patriarchal economy, and Raoul's uncle Guerri, as surrogate father. This apparent foreclosure of the paternal is one that does not, however, operate at all levels, for the text reveals a distinct ambivalence towards the figure of the father, and to all that is implied by the notion of paternity, authority, and continuity. This ambivalence appears in particular in regard to the split between the real and the symbolic father, crucially as manifested through the figure of Raoul Taillefer.

Although Raoul rejects the dead father as symbol of the patrimonial inheritance, land and genealogical continuation, Raoul Taillefer does retain a certain power and resonance. At a crucial point in the fight against Jean de Ponthieu, Raoul is inspired by the memory of his father:

Raous l'esgarde qant le va avisant:
si grant le voit seoir sor l'auferrant
por tout l'or Dieu n'alast il en avant,
qant li remembre de Taillefer errant,
q'i fu ces peres ou tant ot hardemant.

¹⁹ Leupin, 'La Batardise de l'écriture', p. 101.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 1993), p. 1.

Qant l'en souvint, si prist hardement tant
 por quarante homes ne fuïst il de champ. (ll. 2563–69)

(Recognizing him [Jean], Raoul takes stock of him: he sees him towering so high on his horse's back that he wouldn't advance towards him, not for all the gold in the world; but then, suddenly he remembers his father Taillefer who was so brave. The memory of him fires Raoul with such courage that he wouldn't have fled the field, not even for forty knights).

Just as Raoul takes on a greater significance and influence after death, so too does Raoul Taillefer. Rather than as a real, human, father, he is inscribed in memory as an ideal: both father and son become emblematic of chivalric prowess and courage. This vision of the father as a source and inspiration for conflict is an important aspect of the text's repetition and re-cycling of the topos of violence; the father here becomes a symbol of the narrative's own continuation, as textual memory re-figures and re-presents him as mnemonic of its own patterns of violence. It is in this guise of the dead father as symbol of a return to, and perpetuation of, violence, that Taillefer is re-invoked in the memory of both the text and in that of his son. As a symbol of courage in battle, Taillefer is not rejected by Raoul in the same way that he rejects the father as a symbol of patriarchy and the patrimonial inheritance. Instead, he becomes an image for filial identification and inspiration, as both men are linked together in the structures of violence, rupture and death that frame the narrative. The fact the father must *be* dead in order to have a narrative resonance and impetus indicates the essential instability of the text's construction of the paternal. Even in death, however, the characters who represent the patriarchal economy (and I include Raoul here) are not invested with an authority that marks them as inheritors of any discourse of paternity or wisdom. The opposite, in fact, occurs: if the living are bound to an individualised ineffectuality, the dead, when they manage to attain any semblance of power and influence whatsoever, are bound to the perpetuation of fragmentation and death.

Instead of becoming a representative of the Symbolic order in its purest form, the *nom-du-père*, the paternal metaphor that instigates the coherence of language and society, the symbolic father of *Raoul de Cambrai* becomes the source and catalyst of further disruption. Rather than being linked with the transcendent sublime, he is linked with the transcendent abject, with the demonic rather than the divine. The ambiguity and ambivalence of the *chanson*'s figuration of the symbolic father is revealed most evidently in his paradoxical linking with both continuation and death. In contrast to the life of genealogical progression, the repetition and continuation provoked by the dead father only produce further death. The dead father transcends the enclosed, bounded world of both the narrative and the Symbolic order that gives it structure, but at the same time he returns as representative of the beyond of this order, the Real, that rends its mythical fabric. The paternal metaphor may posit itself as the point of origin, as representing an economy of the same that is eternally self-perpetuating, yet this ontological myth is usurped by the intrusion of a remainder that continually resurfaces in the guise of the father bound to death and violence.

As Kay cogently states:

The greater the investment of authority in the father or his symbolic equivalent, the likelier it is that symbolic representations (such as works of literature) will be grounded in a sense of origin (the father), in the privileging of presence over absence (the phallus), and in authority construed as dominance and control; whereas ambiguity and play will be minimal and strictly regulated. Patriarchy, in other words, favours the monologic.²¹

In *Raoul de Cambrai* the father as absence (the dead father) possesses greater power than the father who inhabits the narrative, and both the text and its male characters are representative of fragmentation, loss, and lack, rather than of any notion of authoritative control. The distinct disquiet the text manifests over the locus of the father not only undermines the notion of it as monologic, but also throws into question the very nature of the patriarchal structure, and symbolic order, of the *chanson de geste*.

21 Kay, *The 'Chansons de geste'*, p. 81.